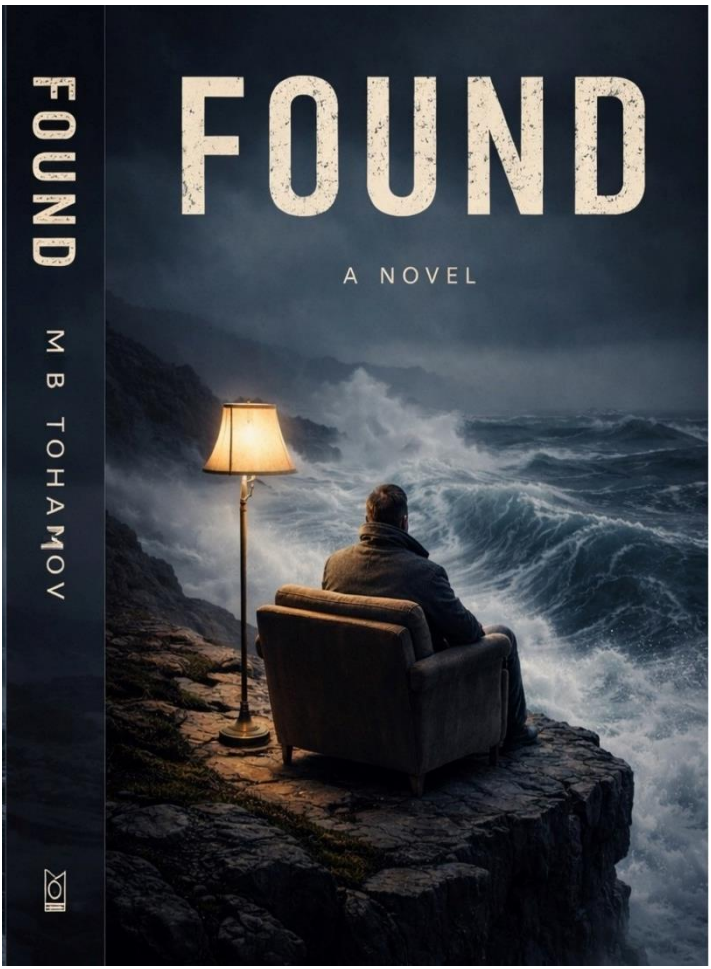
FOUND
A NOVEL
FOUND
M B TOHAMOV

I hope that this Story finds you, als sie mich gefunden hat

Chapter 1 — Prologue

The word did not arrive like a voice.
There was no mouth, no accent, no direction. No sky opening, no machine

humming to life. There was only a pressure, sharp and narrow, like a needle placed carefully behind the eyes.

Found.

Clear. Short. High-pitched, but not sound. Everyone would later argue about that. Linguists, neurologists, priests. They would say *perceived auditory phenomenon*, *shared hallucination*, *mass psychogenic episode*. None of them would agree, and all of them would be wrong in the same way.

Because the word was not heard. It was *placed*.

Every thirty seconds.

No variation. No crescendo. No mercy. Just the same intrusion, punctual as a heartbeat that does not belong to you.

Found.

At first, people looked around. They checked devices. They blamed headphones, feedback, interference. Pilots called towers. Surgeons paused mid-incision. Drivers braked in tunnels. Newsrooms laughed nervously and blamed a prank, a glitch, a foreign signal. Found.

Within hours, the first protocols were opened.

Emergency meetings convened in rooms that smelled of recycled air and old confidence. Men and women who had rehearsed disasters their entire lives flipped through binders with colored tabs. Nuclear escalation. Pandemic containment. Solar flare. Cyberwar.

There was no tab for *a word*.

Found.

Hospitals tried to isolate it. They unplugged monitors. They cut power to wards. They sedated patients who screamed that the word was *inside* their skulls. The screaming did not stop when the electricity went out.

Found.

Media attempted continuity. Anchors smiled with their jaws locked tight, reading statements that dissolved as they spoke. On live television, a woman broke down mid-sentence, pressing her palms against her ears, whispering the word before anyone else could hear it.

Found.

By the end of the first day, the world had learned something it would later try very

hard to forget: there is no such thing as silence once the mind itself becomes the receiver.

People blocked their ears. They wore noise-canceling headphones. They flooded their senses with music, white noise, prayer, screaming crowds.

The word passed through all of it.

Found.

Some tried chemicals. Alcohol. Benzodiazepines. Opiates. Anything to blur the edges. Overdoses multiplied quietly, efficiently, without panic. Suicide hotlines collapsed under their own ringing.

Found.

On the second day, time began to deform. People lost sequence. Morning and night ceased to matter. The word divided existence into intervals: *before Found* and *after Found*. The spaces between thirty seconds stretched and snapped unpredictably. Some swore the word was accelerating. Others begged for it to hurry, just to get it over with.

Found.

Entire cities slowed, then stopped. Trains stood still between stations, doors open,

passengers sitting on floors, rocking. Airports became camps. Borders dissolved not in war but in paralysis.

Found.

No coordinated announcement ever came.

Governments did speak, later. They claimed they had spoken then. But no one could remember the words. Only the one that kept returning, uninvited, indestructible.

Found.

By dawn of the third day, the first bodies appeared in public places without drama. People who had simply stepped out of motion. Hospitals emptied themselves of staff. Police stations locked their doors from the inside. Prisons burned quietly, without riots.

Found.

And then—without warning, without explanation—the word stopped.

Not faded. Not weakened. Stopped.

The silence that followed was worse than the sound.

For several minutes—some said seconds, others swore hours—the world held its

breath. People stood frozen, afraid to move, afraid that movement would summon it back.

In that stillness, something else happened.

Something vast. Sudden. Absolute.

Every mind was flooded.

Images, structures, histories, geometries too complex to name. Faces that were not human. Places that were not Earth. Memories that did not belong to anyone alive. The sensation was not pain but overload, like being handed the sum of all libraries at once, translated imperfectly through neurons never meant to carry such weight.

There was no storage.

No record.

No device survived it.

Satellites failed simultaneously, burning like brief second suns. Networks collapsed into static. Every screen went black. Every signal died mid-sentence.

The upload—no one called it that yet—lasted less than a minute.

When it ended, the world was technologically blind.

Two centuries of infrastructure vanished in an instant.
And then, as if to mark the damage done, the word returned.
Found.
This time, quieter.
As if satisfied.

Chapter 2 — Rieger

They knew him before they knew his name.
In the police station he was first catalogued as *that one again*.

Later as *the blanket man*. Eventually, someone bothered to check the files and remembered: **Rieger**.

He arrived every few days, sometimes every two. Sometimes escorted, sometimes found asleep on a bench, sometimes standing motionless near the airport tram like a misplaced statue. He smelled of old fabric, cold sweat, urine dried too many times, and the faint acidic trace of instant coffee. The smell never quite left the room after he did.

The routine was fixed.

A blanket—always the same grey, industrial, washed too often to be soft anymore.

A cup of coffee—black, lukewarm, untouched half the time.

A chair bolted to the floor.

Rieger accepted these things with the seriousness of a liturgy.

He was old, but not in the way the homeless often are. His body still carried a strange density, as if it remembered strength. His beard grew unevenly, grey and yellowed, framing a mouth that had lost too many teeth to speak clearly but not enough to silence him. His eyes were

the problem. Too awake. Too focused. Not the drifting gaze of dementia, not the fractured darting of acute psychosis. His eyes *measured*.

When he smiled, people felt misjudged.

"You again," someone would say, without cruelty, without warmth.

Rieger would nod. Sometimes he answered. Sometimes he did not. Silence did not mean passivity with him. It meant containment.

He never asked why he was there. He never asked how long it would take. He never resisted the blanket.

What unsettled the officers was not aggression. Rieger was rarely violent. It was his *familiarity*. He knew the station's rhythms better than some recruits. He knew which chair creaked, which radiator knocked, which officer pretended not to listen while listening very carefully.

He also knew their names.

Not all of them.

Only the ones who mattered to him.

No one remembered telling him.

"You were a professor, right?" someone once asked, half joking, half curious.

Rieger looked at him for a long moment, as if searching through a collapsed building for a specific room.

"No," he said finally. "That would have been simpler."

The file was thin, deceptively so.

RIEGER, M.

Age: unclear.

Nationality: unclear.

Previous occupation: "translator," "editor," "technical reader" (disputed).

Languages: German, Russian, English, French, passive knowledge of others.

Diagnosis (historic): PTSD, later revised, then reverted.

Status: known to psychiatric services, recurring admissions, noncompliant.

A note, written years earlier in tighter handwriting, read:

Patient displays intact cognitive function, high verbal capacity, marked perseveration around a single narrative construct ("the Found event"). Not delusional in classical structure. Content overlaps with documented historical mass trauma. Dangerous unpredictability.

The phrase *dangerous unpredictability* had been underlined twice by different pens.

Rieger himself never mentioned diagnoses. He did not argue them, nor deny them. When asked about his past, he deflected not with confusion but with refusal.

"Later," he would say.

"Wrong order."

"Sequence matters."

Sometimes, when pressed, he became almost polite.

"You want before," he once said to a social worker. "But before has become radioactive. Touch it and you burn the after."

That was when they called psychiatry again.

He had lived many lives since the Word.

Some real, some administrative.

At times he was housed—temporary shelters, group homes, facilities with rules he pretended to follow. He always left. Sometimes quietly, sometimes escorted, sometimes in winter without shoes. The street seemed to accept him better than rooms did.

The airport was his favorite.
He said nothing about it, but staff noticed. He slept near arrival gates, under departure boards that no longer meant much in a world where travel had become slower, rarer, almost ceremonial. He liked watching people *leave*. It was the one ritual that still made sense to him.
Every now and then, someone would recognize him.
Not personally—historically.
"You're one of the Found," a young officer once said, half mocking.
Rieger turned slowly.
"Yes," he answered. "We are not extinct."
That officer laughed. Later that night, he dreamed of a metronome.
What made Rieger intolerable to the system was not that he told the story.
It was that he never *improved* it.
No embellishment.
No adaptation to the listener.
No therapeutic arc.
The story did not heal. It did not comfort. It did not moralize. It simply *stood there*, intact, like a block of stone left in the middle of a road everyone else had paved over.

People had learned, collectively, to step around it.

Rieger refused.

And so, on a cold December night, when he was found again—bareheaded, wrapped in a filthy blanket that was not the police's this time, standing too close to traffic and murmuring intervals under his breath—the decision was immediate.

"Enough," the officer said. "Call it in."

This time, there would be paperwork.

This time, there would be a transport.

This time, they would not let him walk away.

Chapter 3 — The Transfer

The decision was made without ceremony.

A call, a name, a sigh.

“§12,” the senior officer said, already rubbing his temple. “Night duty psychiatrist agreed. Known patient. Risk of escalation.”

Paperwork bloomed like mold. Forms were printed, signed, stamped, scanned, printed again. No one argued. Rieger’s name had weight—not authority, but gravity. It pulled procedures toward it.

“Great,” one of the officers muttered. “Forty minutes to the clinic. In this weather.”

Outside, November pressed its cold face against the city. Not snow yet. Worse. Dry, metallic cold that crawled under uniforms and stayed there. The kind that made the streets sound hollow.

Rieger watched them prepare without resistance.

He sat on the bench, blanket wrapped around him—not the police one yet, his own, darker, heavier, stiff with old moisture. His hands were folded. His lips moved silently, counting something that did not correspond to seconds.

When they told him, he nodded.
“Transfer,” he said. “Good. Movement helps.”
No one answered.
The ambulance arrived late, whining rather than roaring, as if ashamed of its task. The rear doors opened with a hydraulic cough. Two paramedics stepped out, already wearing double gloves. One of them glanced at Rieger, then at the officer.
“Infectious?” he asked.
The question was technical. Polite. A way of saying: *he smells like history*.
“Not that we know of,” the officer replied. “Psych.”
The paramedic nodded. FFP2 masks went on—not urgently, not dramatically. Methodically. As if they had learned long ago that some things were safer when filtered.
They guided Rieger toward the stretcher.
“Lie down, please.”
Rieger smiled faintly. “No.”
He sat instead, cross-legged on the transport bed, spine straight, hands resting on his knees like a monk waiting

for a bell. The straps hung loose, unused. For now.

The vehicle lurched into motion.

Inside, the air was too warm, too bright. The smell of disinfectant clashed with the man's odor and lost. A thin sheen of liquid—urine, water, something else—spread beneath Rieger, soaking into the mattress cover. No one commented. One paramedic reached for the cleaning kit and set it near the door, ready.

They did not speak to him.

They tried not to look at him.

Rieger looked at them anyway.

Not aggressively. Not pleading. *Intently.*

"You know," he said softly, "this part is always skipped."

Silence.

"The sermons begin later. Or earlier. Depends who's listening."

One of the paramedics cleared his throat. The other adjusted the monitor, though nothing was connected.

Rieger's gaze drifted to the small wooden cross hanging from a chain around one paramedic's neck. It swayed gently with the vehicle's movement. Back and forth. Pendulum-slow.

He followed it with his eyes.
“Day one,” he said. “They found us.”
The paramedic with the cross froze for half a second.
“No talking, please,” the other said quickly. Not harshly. Procedurally.
Rieger complied—for exactly three breaths.
“Day two,” he continued, voice unchanged, “they showed us their power.”
The city slid past outside: dark windows, closed shops, traffic lights blinking pointlessly for an audience that had learned long ago not to trust signals.
“Day three,” Rieger said, “they spoke to us.”
The cross swayed.
“Day four, they forced us to listen.”
The paramedic swallowed. He did not look at the cross anymore.
“Day five,” Rieger went on, “they entered the mind. No doors. No consent. They called it communication. We called it violation.”
“Sir,” the paramedic said again, louder now.

“Day six,” Rieger said, “they waited. You always wait after planting.”
The ambulance hit a bump. The stretcher creaked.
“And day seven,” Rieger whispered, almost tenderly, “they left us alone with what they had given.”
No one spoke after that.
The monitor beeped though it still wasn’t connected. The smell worsened. The cleaning kit was opened. Spray hissed. Cloth wiped. Futile gestures.
Rieger leaned back against the wall, eyes half closed.
“Knowledge,” he murmured, as if finishing a thought someone else had started. “That was the punishment. Not fire. Not plague. Knowledge without storage. An upload without memory. Pictures burned straight into the wetware and nowhere else.”
The word *upload* did not belong in his mouth. That was what made it worse.
“Every satellite screamed,” he said. “Every cable sang once and died. A chorus too heavy for metal. Your ancestors didn’t fear darkness. They feared silence *after* signal.”

The ambulance slowed.
Ahead, the clinic rose from the dark like a block of unlit thought.
Rieger opened his eyes fully now.
“We are almost there,” he said, pleasantly. “This is where things get messy.”
The doors opened.
Cold rushed in.
Hands reached for him.
The straps would come next.

Chapter 4 — The Clinic

The clinic received them without greeting.

No sign. No announcement. Just light spilling onto concrete and the smell of disinfectant that never fully masked what came before it. The automatic doors opened, hesitated, then closed again behind them like a thought reconsidered too late.

Inside, everything was beige by design.

Walls, floors, doors—beige was the color of neutrality, of decisions deferred. Night staff moved with the economy of people who knew the building too well to be impressed by it. They did not rush. They never rushed. Rushing suggested surprise, and surprise was a luxury the ward had surrendered years ago.

Two nurses approached immediately.

They knew him.

"Rieger," the taller one said, voice steady, beard thick and dark, forearms marked with old scars and newer tattoos. He was built like a doorframe. "You came back on foot or with help this time?"

"With witnesses," Rieger answered. "That's an improvement."

The nurse did not smile.

The cuffs stayed on.

This was protocol—inside transfer or not, police restraints remained until the patient crossed the threshold of isolation. The metal circled Rieger's wrists, cold and faintly damp. When they finally unlocked them, the sound was too loud in the corridor.

Rieger rubbed his wrists slowly, methodically, as if massaging memory back into his hands. He did not attempt to flee. He did not test the space. He simply *returned* to his body.

Liberation without relief.

"Cigarettes?" he asked.

"Later," the bearded nurse said. "If you behave."

Rieger nodded, accepting the condition as one accepts weather.

They guided him down the corridor.

Doors passed on either side—some closed, some with narrow windows fogged from breath and soap and despair. Somewhere, someone screamed. Not sharply. Not in pain. In frustration. It echoed once, then dissolved into the building's acoustics like a swallowed word.

“This is familiar,” Rieger said. “Same paint.”
“It was repainted last month,” the nurse replied.
“Yes,” Rieger said. “Still familiar.”
They stopped in front of the isolation room.
White. Bare. Clean in a way that felt temporary. A mattress bolted to the floor. A camera eye in the corner, unblinking, pretending not to be judgment. The door was thick, reinforced, with a small window that distorted faces into suggestions.
They led him inside.
The door closed.
The lock engaged.
Rieger stood in the center of the room for a moment, breathing. Then he sat on the mattress, hands resting on his thighs, posture calm, almost ceremonial.
He waited.
Time stretched.
Outside, a nurse documented his arrival. Another checked vitals through the window without comment. The bearded nurse lingered a moment longer than necessary.

“You know the rules,” he said through the door. “Doctor will come when he can.”
Rieger looked up.
“Tell him,” he said, “that chronology matters.”
The nurse hesitated.
Then he left.
The doctor came late.
Very late.
He was young. Younger than the authority his role pretended to grant him. Tall, broad-shouldered, filling the corridor in a way that suggested physical confidence but not certainty. His alarm phone blinked red on his waist, silent but insistent, like a threat that did not need to speak to be understood.
He did not wear a stethoscope.
No one did, anymore. Not here. Hard objects invited hands.
He stopped outside the window and looked in.
Rieger looked back.
There it was—that glance.
Not fear. Not contempt.
Curiosity.
It lasted half a second too long.
Rieger’s face changed.

The shift was subtle but absolute, like weather crossing a border. He stood abruptly and struck his forehead against the door—once, twice—with force that surprised even the nurses watching from down the hall.

Blood blossomed, bright and immediate.

"Rieger—!" someone shouted.

He smeared the blood across the window with his palm, dragging his fingers through it, shaping letters with desperate precision.

F

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The door burst open before he could finish.

Hands grabbed him. Weight pressed him down. The fixation bed was rolled in—size L, nine-point restraints, straps flapping like loose tongues. Rieger fought—not blindly, not wildly—but with terrifying purpose, twisting, pulling, trying to loop a strap around his own neck.

"IM now!" the doctor shouted.

The syringe appeared. Haloperidol. Benzodiazepine. Muscle. Fast.

Rieger screamed—not in pain, but in fury.

"You asked to see!" he roared, as the drug hit. "You *looked*!"

Then his body betrayed him.

Sweat poured from him in sheets. His limbs slackened. His words dissolved into fragments, then into breath.

They strapped him down anyway.

Protocol did not trust silence.

The doctor stood back, chest heaving, soaked through his scrubs.

"Great," he muttered. "Just great. I'll have to justify all of this."

No one answered.

Later, much later, when the ward settled into its uneasy night rhythm, the doctor sat alone at a terminal.

2045 blinked back at him from the screen.

The files were thin. Redacted. Rewritten. Diagnoses changed names but not meanings.

PTSD, the old code said.

In staff slang, whispered, never written, another term existed.

The Found.

The doctor leaned back.

Curiosity did not fade.

It sharpened.

Chapter 5 — Meet the Doctor

Dawn did not arrive so much as *leak*.

A pale contamination seeping through high windows, blurring the hard edges of night without offering warmth. The ward quieted in that peculiar way it always did before morning rounds—machines humming softer, voices lowered, bodies surrendering to exhaustion rather than sleep.

Rieger lay restrained, eyes closed, chest rising unevenly. The blood on the window had been wiped away, but its ghost remained: a faint smear no disinfectant could fully erase.

The doctor waited.

He should not have been there anymore. His shift was technically over. Another physician would arrive soon—older, sharper, uninterested in stories. This one stayed.

Walid was tall—one meter ninety, easily—and heavy in a way that did not suggest excess but *presence*. A hundred kilos that did not announce themselves loudly, but claimed space simply by being there. When he entered a room, furniture adjusted. Chairs creaked

preemptively. Doorways measured him twice.

His skin was dark, almost black when the light was poor, the color of something that had absorbed many summers and kept them. Under hospital neon, it took on a dull bronze sheen, as if the light itself was unsure how to rest on him. His hands were large, soft at the edges, the fingers thick, capable of both restraint and force. People noticed his hands before they noticed his face.

He moved slowly, not from hesitation but from economy. Each gesture seemed chosen to avoid waste. When he walked, there was something ursine about it—grounded, lateral, a rolling transfer of weight rather than a step-by-step progression. He did not rush. He displaced air. In corridors, others adjusted their trajectories around him without being aware of it.

His face confused people. Broad, almost childish in its proportions. Full cheeks. A mouth that rested slightly open when he was tired. His beard grew unevenly, as if it had never quite decided what it wanted to be. One eye lagged behind the

other—just enough to unsettle the attentive observer. Not a defect, not a pathology. A delay. As though part of him processed the world half a second later and refused to apologize for it. This asymmetry made people uncomfortable. They often mistook it for simplicity.

He spoke rarely. When he did, he allowed silence to form first, as if testing whether the words were truly necessary. His voice was low, untrained, almost gentle, carrying none of the authority his size promised. He knew when to speak and—more importantly—when not to. This restraint was learned early, through correction rather than instruction.

As a child, he had been bigger than the others. Stronger. Slower. He had been bullied anyway. Size had not protected him; it had made him visible. A target too obvious to ignore. He learned quickly that strength, when unacknowledged, invites provocation. That a large body paired with quietness confuses hierarchies and irritates those who depend on them.

Even now, people underestimated him instinctively. They saw a good-hearted giant. A helper. Someone safe. Someone who would carry heavy things, listen patiently, nod at the right moments. They trusted him with tasks, not with conclusions.

He did nothing to correct this.

Inside that body—inside the slow eye, the heavy hands, the deliberate gait—there was no softness to match their projections. What lived there was not cruelty, but clarity. A cold, durable understanding of how easily bodies are mistaken for intentions. How easily stillness is read as consent.

Walid knew what people saw when they looked at him.

He also knew they were wrong.

And he had learned, long ago, that correcting such errors was rarely worth the cost.

He removed the gloves he had forgotten he was wearing and stood just outside the isolation room, alarm phone blinking steadily at his waist. He had reviewed the file twice already. There was nothing new in it the second time.

He opened the door.
The sound was enough.
Rieger's eyes snapped open.
They regarded each other in silence—doctor standing, patient bound, the asymmetry so complete it should have ended the exchange before it began. Instead, it clarified it.
"You came back," Rieger said hoarsely.
"I didn't have to," the doctor replied.
"No," Rieger agreed. "You wanted to."
The doctor pulled a chair from the wall and sat down, careful to place it outside arm's reach. Not from fear—procedure. He rested his elbows on his knees, posture relaxed but attentive, the practiced neutrality of someone trained to listen without inviting.
"I'm Dr. Walid," he said. "I'll be speaking with you now."
Rieger smiled weakly. "Names arrive late."
Walid did not respond.
"I won't ask you questions yet," he said after a moment. "I'll listen."
Rieger exhaled slowly, as if testing the air.

“That’s new,” he murmured. “Dangerous, too.”

Silence returned, thick but not hostile.

“You looked,” Rieger said finally. “That’s what triggered it.”

Walid nodded. “I’m aware.”

“No,” Rieger corrected him gently. “You’re not. You think awareness is intellectual. It isn’t. It’s anatomical.”

Walid’s jaw tightened almost imperceptibly.

“Explain,” he said.

Rieger laughed—a soft, cracked sound that hurt his own ears. “Careful. That’s how it starts.”

Walid waited.

“The Word,” Rieger said. “Found. You learned it as a historical phenomenon. Two days. A myth with footnotes. But you didn’t learn the *intervals*.”

Walid leaned back slightly. “I know the official sequence.”

Rieger shook his head. “Official sequences are embalmed. They don’t rot anymore, but they also don’t breathe.”

He shifted against the restraints, testing them—not to escape, but to feel their limits.

“When it began,” he said, “it wasn’t noise. It was *pressure*. Like too much meaning trying to occupy a skull designed for survival, not comprehension.”

Walid’s pen hovered, then stilled.

“They didn’t just speak,” Rieger continued. “They uploaded. Not data—*context*. Images without compression. Histories without narrative. Imagine receiving the entire genealogy of a species as a single sensation.”

Walid frowned. “That would destroy any known storage system.”

“Yes,” Rieger said. “That was the judgment.”

He opened his eyes wider now, clarity burning through the sedation.

“Every satellite screamed,” he said. “Every network burned itself blind trying to catch it. Humanity thought it was an attack. It wasn’t. It was a *gift without adaptation*.”

Walid swallowed.

“Knowledge,” Rieger said, “was our punishment. Not ignorance.”

The words settled between them, heavy.

Walid spoke carefully. “You’re describing a trauma response. A mass one.”
Rieger smiled, not unkindly. “And you’re describing a diagnosis that keeps you safe.”
Walid felt the sting and did not deny it.
“You’re a stranger,” Rieger said suddenly.
Walid looked up. “Excuse me?”
“Your vowels,” Rieger said. “French edges. North African cadence. Your grandparents prayed differently. Your childhood was bilingual. You learned silence early.”
Walid stiffened. “That’s not relevant.”
Rieger nodded. “Of course. That’s what relevance sounds like when it’s frightened.”
Walid’s alarm phone blinked.
Rieger closed his eyes again.
“You should go,” he said. “Morning will bring committees.”
Walid did not move.
“I’ll come back,” he said instead.
Rieger opened one eye. “Then bring better questions.”

The ward speakers crackled—shift change.

Walid stood.

At the door, he paused. “Do you believe,” he asked quietly, “that what you experienced was real?”

Rieger did not hesitate.

“No,” he said. “I believe it was *accurate*.”

Walid left.

Behind him, Rieger whispered—not loudly, not ritualistically, but as one states a fact that does not require witnesses.

“Found.”

Chapter 6 — The Second revelation

The restraints came off an hour later.
Not all of them.
Just enough.
Protocol allowed it once sedation had settled and vitals stabilized. A concession dressed up as trust. Rieger flexed his wrists slowly when the cuffs were removed, massaging the skin with the attention of someone reacquainting himself with an old instrument. He did not thank anyone. Gratitude would have implied a favor. This was maintenance.
Walid returned alone.
The ward was quieter now. The kind of quiet that was not peace but attrition. Patients slept or pretended to. Nurses moved like shadows with keys. Somewhere a television murmured to itself, forgotten.
Walid carried no clipboard this time. Only a cup of coffee, already half cold, already bitter. He pulled the same chair and sat again, closer now—not close enough to be reckless, but close enough to signal intent.
Rieger noticed.
“You came back without armor,” he said. “Interesting.”

“I didn’t come as an examiner,” Walid replied. “Not yet.”
“That’s a lie,” Rieger said calmly. “But a polite one.”
Walid exhaled. “I want to understand.”
Rieger’s mouth twitched. “So curious,” he murmured. “So, so curious. That’s the dangerous kind.”
He leaned back against the mattress, eyes fixed on Walid’s face with unsettling precision.
“Are you sure,” Rieger continued, “that you’re equipped for this? I don’t mean intelligence. You wouldn’t be here if you were stupid. But intelligence is not the same as instrumentation.”
Walid stiffened, but held his ground.
“You think I can’t follow,” he said.
Rieger smiled, and for a brief moment there was warmth in it. Then it vanished.
“If I poured all the knowledge of the world into Morse code,” Rieger said slowly, “and sealed you in a room without knowing the alphabet—would you call the message false? Or yourself inadequate?”
Walid said nothing.

Rieger leaned forward slightly, voice lowering.

"That night," he said, "the ideas landed in our heads already translated. Your neurons did the work. My neurons did the work. But they did not translate *the same*. You and I would have seen different films, heard different harmonics. You must ask yourself: do you even have the tools to decode what I decoded?"

Walid felt the impulse to argue. He resisted it.

He shifted in his chair, grounding himself, picked up the pen he had brought almost unconsciously, and placed it deliberately on the table.

"Try me," he said.

Rieger laughed softly.

Then he stopped.

The humor drained from his face with frightening speed. His gaze dropped to the floor, as if the room had opened beneath him.

"Once upon a time," he said.

Walid froze.

The phrase was obscene in this place. Fairy-tale syntax in a room designed to

neutralize imagination. It should have sounded ridiculous.

It didn't.

"Once upon a time," Rieger repeated, "there was a species clever enough to steal, and cowardly enough to forget why it ran."

His speech accelerated—not manic, not disorganized, but torrential. A controlled flood.

"They did not arrive singing," he said. "They arrived hiding. Their ships were not arks, not chariots of fire. They were evacuation vessels. Lifeboats from a court that had already passed judgment."

Walid felt his pulse quicken.

"They brought with them protocols they barely understood," Rieger continued. "Technologies older than their own myths. One of them—only one—allowed thought to propagate without medium. No wire. No air. No delay."

Walid whispered despite himself, "Telepathy."

Rieger shook his head sharply.

"That's a children's word. This was not mind-reading. This was *idea transfer*.

Entire structures. Images, ethics, histories—intact."

He looked up now, eyes burning.

"And when they used it," he said, "everything broke."

The room seemed to contract.

"The upload was not meant for us," Rieger said. "It was a verdict. A release of records. Our technology tried to store it. It couldn't. Every satellite fried itself screaming. Every archive burned. Humanity experienced total blackout—not darkness, but *erasure*. Two centuries of dependence collapsed in seconds."

Walid's mouth was dry.

"We thought it was an attack," Rieger went on. "So we shot down the sky. We destroyed our own mirrors. And in doing so, we isolated ourselves perfectly."

He smiled without joy.

"Exactly what fugitives do."

Walid found his voice. "You're saying… this was punishment?"

Rieger nodded.

"Knowledge," he said. "Unfiltered. Unstorable. Knowledge without infrastructure. They judged us worthy of memory, but not of control."

He leaned back, exhausted now, the storm having spent itself.
“You see,” he added softly, “madness would be easier. Hallucinations can be cured. Truth like this only metastasizes.”
Walid sat very still.
Outside, the ward clock ticked. Thirty seconds passed.
Rieger closed his eyes.
“Enough for tonight,” he said. “If you stay longer, you’ll start believing me. And then you’ll be in trouble.”
Walid stood slowly.
At the door, he paused. “I’ll be back,” he said.
Rieger did not open his eyes.
“I know,” he replied.

Chapter 7 — Doupt is other way to certainty

Walid did not sleep.

He lay on the narrow on-call bed with his shoes still on, one arm folded across his chest as if holding something in place. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw sequences without order—images that were not images yet, impressions without names. He opened them again before they could settle.

At four in the morning he gave up.

The corridor was empty in the way only institutions are empty: never truly vacant, merely holding their breath. He walked to the staff kitchen, poured coffee that tasted like burnt cardboard, and drank it anyway. His alarm phone blinked. Still silent.

He told himself this was normal.

Curiosity was part of the job. Questioning narratives was healthy. Psychiatry lived precisely in the space between experience and meaning. And yet—something had shifted. Not belief. He was careful with that word. Belief was what his application for citizenship had already taught him to keep vague.

Religion?
Cultural background?
Personal convictions?
Each box he had filled cautiously, aware that too much clarity invited suspicion. He had learned early—on the other side of the sea—that certainty was dangerous in the wrong hands.
Still, Rieger's words clung.
Not as doctrine. As *structure*.
Walid opened a terminal.
2055 greeted him again, sterile and thin. Archives were sparse. The Found Event—capitalized now, fossilized—was fragmented across a thousand contradictory entries. Wikipedia called it an *unidentified non-human intelligence communication phenomenon*. Military journals leaned toward Cold War residue, psychological warfare scaled beyond intent. Fringe platforms screamed of secret societies, Illuminati, ascended humans, angels misclassified as algorithms.
Every explanation explained something—and concealed something else.

There was no censorship. That was the problem.

Too many narratives crowded the space where coherence should have been.

Walid leaned back and closed his eyes.

He thought of his parents.

They had lived through the aftermath. Not the event itself—too young—but the years when people stopped talking about it properly. When silence became a form of hygiene.

When he had once asked his father—carefully, respectfully—about *that time*, the answer had been immediate.

"Dark days," his father said. "Forget them. Be grateful you didn't live it. Pray it never comes back."

No elaboration. No curiosity. A taboo shaped like mercy.

Walid had not insisted again.

Until now.

By morning, the meeting reframed everything.

"Known patient," the senior doctor said, rolling his eyes at the name. "Escalation consistent with previous episodes. Aggression justified restraints. Court will

accept the request. We push for longer internment, isolation if needed."
No one objected.
"Medication compliance," someone added. "Depot injection. Social services can place him after discharge. Preferably far from transit hubs."
The plan was efficient. Humane. Forgetful.
Walid said nothing.
He felt the familiar tension of being the *other* again—the foreign speaker, the one who hadn't absorbed the unspoken agreements. He could hear it in the cadence of their voices: *don't reopen sealed rooms*.
Later that day, an email arrived.
Six weeks.
That was the timeline.
The court would require a new psychiatric expertise. They were considering a locked facility this time. Rieger could not be released again. Too unpredictable. Too dangerous.
Volunteers were requested.
Walid answered before doubt could intervene.

He told himself it was professional interest. An opportunity to observe a rare case longitudinally. He told himself many things.

The truth was simpler.

He wanted to know if Rieger was lying.

Or worse—if he wasn't.

Over the following weeks, the obsession grew quietly.

He discussed it with his girlfriend once. Then twice. By the third time she stopped him.

"You're letting him inside your head," she said. "That's not healthy."

Walid didn't answer.

He tried his father again. This time the line went quiet for a long moment before the connection ended. Not dropped. Ended.

No more attempts were made.

Six weeks passed.

The email returned like a summons.

EXPERT OPINION REQUIRED.

Walid closed the message.

He knew what he would write.

He also knew what he would ask.

Chapter 8 — Six Weeks and some hours later

Six weeks passed.

Time behaved differently inside the clinic. It did not flow; it *accumulated*. Dust on ledges. Notes in files. Silences between incidents. Rieger did not improve. He also did not deteriorate in the way they expected. No cognitive decline. No fragmentation. No softening.

That worried them more.

The mail arrived at dawn, copied to every senior physician and every junior who still believed effort mattered.

COURT REQUEST — UPDATED PSYCHIATRIC EXPERTISE REQUIRED
PATIENT: RIEGER, M.
PLACEMENT IN LOCKED FACILITY UNDER CONSIDERATION

Walid volunteered immediately.

No one argued. He was big, physically imposing, calm under pressure. He had handled Rieger before. He was also, the senior doctor noted with faint relief, *not emotionally involved*. That was what they always assumed about quiet people.

The smoking room was a wound.

A square of stale air cut out of the ward, walls permanently tattooed with insults, crude drawings, political slogans written and overwritten in every substance patients could smuggle past control. Cigarette smoke layered itself into geological strata. The room was cleaned daily and ruined hourly. Every repainting was an invitation.

Rieger sat on the built-in bench, legs crossed, staring out through the reinforced window at a sky that was grey but mercifully dry. He was smoking slowly, deliberately, as if measuring time by combustion.

Walid entered.

Rieger turned his head and nodded once.

"Doctor," he said. "You survived."

Walid gestured toward the door. "Walk with me."

Rieger did not move immediately. He stood, instead, and crossed to the wall-mounted electric lighter. He lit another cigarette, finished the first, then followed—unhurried, barefoot, trousers too large and dragging faint dust patterns behind him. He wore a clinic T-shirt, clean. Someone had made the effort.

They passed through the corridor to a small examination room at the rear of the ward.
Walid had prepared it carefully.
Door closed.
No camera.
Alarm phone blinking on his waist.
Staff informed: *I am with Rieger.*
Screams were common here. But context mattered.
Walid was taller. He outweighed Rieger by a margin that should have been reassuring. Experience had taught him otherwise.
Rieger sat.
Adjusted himself.
Waited.
Walid introduced himself again, formally this time. Explained the court request. Explained capacity, dangerousness, prolonged hospitalization. The words were familiar to both of them.
The outcome was already written.
Rieger listened without interrupting.
When Walid finished, he hesitated—then spoke honestly.
“I’m still curious,” he said. “I want to hear more.”

Rieger laughed.
Not loudly. Not kindly.
“So,” he said, “you’re using curiosity as anesthesia. Dangerous technique.”
Walid didn’t flinch. “I don’t think this is psychosis.”
Rieger’s eyes sharpened.
“Of course you don’t,” he said. “You’re young. Educated. You think madness announces itself with foam and incoherence. You don’t yet know how elegant truth becomes when it has nothing left to lose.”
Walid picked up his pen, grounded himself, then set it down.
“Try me,” he said again. “Properly.”
Rieger leaned back.
For a long moment he said nothing.
Then his face darkened—not with rage, but with gravity.
“Once upon a time,” he said.
Walid felt the room tilt.
“—no,” Rieger corrected himself. “That’s wrong. That implies fiction. Let’s be precise.”
He leaned forward.
“I was cultivated before the Found,” he said. “Not important, but relevant. Cold

War literature. Russian despair. American arrogance. Victorian obsession with order. German philosophy's love affair with despair. Kafka, of course—because every system dreams of itself as a labyrinth."

He smiled thinly.

"I spoke languages. I still do. Language is how I knew something was wrong when the Word came. Because it arrived *before* translation."

Rieger's voice gathered speed.

I doubt that you will understand. Not because you are stupid—no. You sit in front of me in the white coat; you passed your exams. But listen: if you had been *there* the way I was there, the memories that landed in your head would not match mine. The wave is one, the render is many. The Found do not speak in words; they pour *idea*. Your neurons do the translation, your life supplies the paint. If all the knowledge of the world arrives in Morse and you never learned the code, all you hear is polite tapping on the coffin lid. *Do you see?* The question is not whether the message was true. The

question is whether you have the right tools to see it whole.

Once upon a time—

No, that's already a lie. There is no "once," there is only *again*. Still: *Once upon a time* for your comfort, Doctor, because your mind likes a beginning.

Once upon a time the word beat like a hidden drum. Found. Thirty seconds—tick—Found. We mistook rhythm for mercy. Then judgment came as knowledge. Not lightning, not plague. An upload. They opened the sluices. Every archive they had of us and of themselves, every face and city and covenant and crime, poured into the sky we ourselves had laced with machines—and into us. The iron tree overhead bloomed fire. Satellites went blind and fell like stunned birds. Networks screamed, screens died, the long wires forgot their purpose. Your world went black and my skull went bright.

Say: a wave without language struck the coast of mind. Each of us received according to our codecs. The imam's son heard it as a horn and a recitation that had no breath. The cantor's grandson tasted

apples and ash and the shofar of an autumn that never ended. A Saxon engineer saw test patterns, grids collapsing to a single pixel that pulsed like a star. A girl in Lagos smelled diesel and rain and understood a proof without symbols. A fisher in Hokkaido saw a rope of light tying nine islands together and named it tree. A monk heard no sound at all and yet his bones bowed. *Same wave; different libraries; different render.*

You ask what I saw. I will show you, and you will see something else—this is the joke and the justice.

I saw the garden that was not a cradle but a dock, floodlights turning every way, searing a pursuer's eyes. I saw the gate, not flaming steel but saturated thought, a jammer singing the mind into static so the hunters lost our scent. I saw Babel, not as wrath, but as a gift we misnamed: language shattered into tongues like clay pots to keep a single signal from betraying our camp. I saw Prometheus, not thief of fire, but thief of protocol—latencies and checksums and the discipline of thought that does not leak when it crosses a skull. I saw the horn, not

of ram, not of angel, but of memory, the thought-wave that summons dust to remember its shape. I saw Yggdrasil, not bark but backbone, a lattice of paths we once walked between stars, pruned to stumps by fear. I saw Ragnarök again and again; the wolf was entropy with a biography.

You think I drew that from books? Yes—and more. My library was already crowded: Kafka's rooms with doors that open into tighter rooms, Tolstoy's winters that judge, Dostoevsky's cellars where guilt rehearses its alibis, Whitman's meadows, Nietzsche's laughter, Rimbaud's derangements, Dickinson's needles of ice, Celan's ash. French salons, German basements, Russian kitchens, American billboards, Qur'anic dawns, psalms of thirst, Greek choirs, Norse iron. The upload found this warehouse and used what was on the shelves. It always does. That is why yours will differ. Your warehouse is prayer mats and Mediterranean noon, your father's quiet rules, the smell of cumin and disinfectant, a French textbook with coffee stains, a border crossing at night.

The same wave will dress itself in your cloth. *This is mercy and mischief at once.* And then the punishment. Because your councils tried to filter. They laid gauze over the sea and called it governance. They said: throttle the bandwidth of God. They wrote laws for thunder. They placed mesh on the conduits, clever as hedgehogs, saying: this fruit may pass; that fruit is contraband. The Found felt the pinch of our pincers and spoke as judge, not teacher. The verdict was not fire but *more knowing than we could bear*. They loosed the whole archive. They loaded every companion image, every ancestor echo, every map of our theft and flight and settling. They aimed it at the sky and at our skulls, and our machines—our bright excuses—boiled. The blackout was the longest night in two centuries, but the mind had noon at midnight and hungered for dark.

You want details? You will taste mine as if they were yours; that is the price.

I saw a city of bone under a red sea, ships like vertebrae stitching currents into roads. I saw markets where thought itself was bartered by weight, where an old

woman held a scale that balanced prayers against equations. I saw a child with a skull of polished silver into which teachers poured story without word; the child's tears were for beauty, not pain. I saw a procession of men carrying glass hammers that struck stone and made it sing. I saw a plain of mirrors turned upward to blind a hunter in orbit. I saw a courtroom without walls where the defendants wore our faces and the charge was not hate but *habit*. I saw shepherds with antennas for crooks, drawing flocks of signals across hills that remembered feet. I saw soldiers building a wall out of broken alphabets to stop an idea.

And I saw us arrive. Not as kings. Not as innocent. As fugitives with a bounty on our breath. You softened it into Eden so your children could sleep. You turned pursuit into punishment so guilt would have a lullaby. You made a serpent to carry the blame your ancestors were tired of holding. You invented a woman to hand the apple because the first thief refused to say his own name out loud. You raised an altar over a grave and said,

“This is worship.” The Found peeled the lacquer with a single glare.
There were seven intervals—remember them as you would remember your mother’s face: Finding, Showing, Speaking, Commanding, Violating, Waiting, Forsaking. We lived them and misnamed them. Finding was the word—Found—like a nail every half-minute. Showing was the brief mercy when the cadence stopped and we were permitted to look the wound in the eye. Speaking was the hour the boy—yes, the one they chose because we would not—stood before the world not to speak *for* us but to keep from drowning while idea swept through him. Commanding was the moment the Found said: tell the story straight and stop sewing crowns out of scars. Violating was *ours*: the filters, the nets, the throttles, the committees. Waiting was *theirs*: the long blade of patience that cuts deeper than rage. Forsaking was the upload—knowledge as flood—leaving us with a dark so total it made candles feel like lies.

Walid whispered, “The blackout.”

“Yes,” Rieger said. “Judgment by overload. He showed us *everything*. Our ancestors. Their world. Their crimes. And then he left us with it and took away the tools to process it.”
Rieger leaned forward again, eyes burning.
“Wars came after. Religion fractured. Universities imploded. Everyone tried to rewrite the story to survive it.”
He paused.
“You’re still writing,” he said to Walid. “That’s why you’re here.”
Silence flooded the room.
Walid realized his hands were shaking.
Rieger softened, just slightly.
“You’re not stupid,” he said. “You’re just late.”
Walid looked up. “Why you?”
Rieger shrugged.
“I remembered,” he said simply. “Others drank or prayed or killed. I remembered.”
He stood slowly, carefully.
“That’s my crime.”
The alarm phone blinked.
Walid did not move.
Rieger turned at the door.

“When the Word comes again,” he said, “you’ll understand why storage was mercy.”
Then he smiled, faint and terrible.
“Found.”
The door closed.
Walid sat alone, knowing with terrifying clarity that his report would be correct—and irrelevant.
The system would contain Rieger.
The story would not be contained.
And somewhere, deep behind the noise of the world, a metronome waited.
Every thirty seconds.
Found.

Chapter 9- Fremdanamnese

Walid left the room more confused than when he entered.

He felt overstimulated, like a sponge that had soaked up too much but couldn't absorb it all. His mind was tangled in threads, trying to piece together Rieger's words—the references, the fragments, the structure. But no matter how much he tried, he couldn't see where the man had cracked, where his mind had begun to break under the weight of what he had witnessed.

What Rieger had said was not a spontaneous outburst. It was methodical, a narrative woven together like someone who had been rehearsing for this moment, for this role, all their life—as if he were performing the final act of an actor's career. An hour of speaking, and then nothing more.

Walid couldn't remember much after that. His actions seemed to blur together. He wasn't sure when he left the clinic, or how long he had been walking. Everything felt like a series of automatic motions, as if his body were performing a script he hadn't read. His thoughts were distant, muted, as though his brain

couldn’t process anything beyond the immediate task. He moved like a robot: each step mechanical, each word mechanical.

He arrived home.

Antonia was already talking, as she often did after her long day at work. Her voice filled the room, a constant stream of complaints—about her coworkers, about her boss, about the office fridge and the eternal chaos of small, unimportant things. It was her way of coping, but today Walid could barely process any of it.

She spoke without pause, while he stared at the floor, the walls, the ceiling—anything but her.

He barely responded. He drank a beer, then poured himself a glass of wine, and then another. Naturally, he never drank much. It was something that had been forbidden in his religious upbringing—a sin, a stain. But here, now, he could drink as much as he wanted without anyone knowing. Without anyone questioning him.

He wondered, idly, if Antonia could ever understand the distance between them.

The conversations they had felt like nothing, as though they were slipping through his fingers. He never mentioned her to his family, and she never questioned it. They both lived in silent compartments, each one closing off parts of themselves. His parents still believed, or hoped, that they lived separately.

But here, in the silence of the night, Walid felt exposed in a way he couldn't explain. His mind was flooded with the images Rieger had forced him to see, with the events of the last days, the things he had no control over—and yet everything seemed to land on him, as if he were responsible for it all.

Antonia's complaints about her work, her life, filled the room—but they felt far away, muffled by the tension in his chest, the overwhelming weight of his own thoughts.

Finally, he went to bed, too exhausted to fight it. His body felt like it had been through a war, muscles tight, strained. He hadn't realized it at the time, but he was worn out, drained by an internal battle he couldn't name.

He slept.

The next morning, he woke with cramps in every muscle, the kind that felt like he'd fought an invisible battle all night. His body ached as if he had run a marathon or lifted too much weight. It wasn't physical exhaustion; it was the kind of exhaustion that made his mind feel fractured.

He stared at the ceiling, disoriented. The weight of it all settled in him again—the event, Rieger's testimony, the fragments of truth and madness that refused to let him go.

Was it madness?

Or was it the reality of what Rieger had said?

Was he the one losing his mind?

He didn't know. And that terrified him.

He looked at the clock. Five minutes left before the alarm.

He deactivated it before it could ring and turned his head toward Antonia's silhouette, curled away from him, her back forming a quiet refusal in the dim light. He stayed still for a moment, watching the slow rise and fall of her breathing, then stood up carefully, as if his body belonged to someone older,

heavier. Pain ran through his calves and lower back. He moved anyway.
He dragged himself to the kitchen.
No coffee.
Of course.
It was his responsibility. He always forgot to buy espresso beans. That morning would end with his first coffee at work—bitter, too strong, drunk too fast. His head was still aching—alcohol, migraine, or something else entirely. The distinction didn't matter anymore.
He opened Antonia's bag without asking and took an ibuprofen. She always carried some. For headaches, cramps, coworkers, life.
Minutes later, she woke up.
"Why did you turn off the alarm?" she asked, her voice still thick with sleep. "And why didn't you wake me?"
He didn't answer.
He just looked at her with one half-closed eye, his face stiff, unreadable. For a second, he wanted to cross the room, to sit on the bed, to pull her toward him and tell her everything—about the night, about Rieger, about the fear that had settled somewhere behind

his eyes and refused to leave. The words were there. He could feel them pressing against his teeth.
He didn't move.
Antonia sighed, turned away, and went to the bathroom. He dressed quickly, mechanically, pulling on clothes without truly looking at them. He left the apartment without saying good morning.
It wasn't strange.
But it wasn't usual.
Outside, the morning was pale and undecided. Under his clothes, his skin—still carrying the half-tanned memory of another latitude, another sea—felt foreign to him, like a reminder of a life that no longer fit. He walked toward the clinic with the dull certainty that something had shifted, that whatever had entered his mind the night before had not left with sleep.
And somewhere, deep inside, a word he refused to think was already waiting.
That morning, Walid scribbled a note in his calendar: *Call ex-legal representative of Herr Rieger.* He needed to collect the Fremdanamnese—the patient's history from someone who once held

responsibility for him. The task seemed simple enough, but when Walid looked closer, the edges blurred.

The lawyer had abandoned the case months ago. No formal reason. Walid had heard that the lawyer simply couldn't keep up with Rieger's shifting story. The client's ability to persuade experts of his sanity had somehow become a black hole for everyone involved. Walid couldn't decide if he was falling into the same pattern of denial or simply following protocol. It wasn't clear anymore.

The rules of the clinic dictated that the expertise should always occur outside of regular working hours—no exceptions. Walid would be paid for it, but there was no way to claim overtime for something like this. It was simply part of the grind, an unpaid extra that kept the bureaucracy functioning.

At 17:00, after spending the day attending to patients in the Gerontopsychiatrie ward—what he called the "Winter of Life"—Walid finally wrapped up his work. He was free to leave, but he stayed in the office

for a moment longer, the weight of the task still pulling at him. He reached for the phone.

The voicemail picked up on the second ring. A heavy Bavarian accent responded, announcing himself as Herr Harrer, with a polite request to leave his name and contact details so he could call back.

Walid hesitated.

He feared the ex-legal representative would recognize Rieger's name and immediately block the number, never returning the call. He didn't want to risk it. Instead of formalities, he simply left his number and a curt message, asking for a callback.

No ceremony. No mention of Rieger.

The callback came the next day.

Walid was already at work, sipping his first coffee after a long, irritating handover from the night nurses. He hesitated before answering—he did not recognize the number—but something in him knew. This was it.

Herr Harrer was, against all expectation, a gentleman. He laughed openly when he heard the name of the patient, asked how

Rieger was doing, then added—almost with wonder—that it was still a miracle he was alive. Not safe. Not sound. But alive.

The laughter died the moment Walid asked about the Event.

Harrer hesitated.

He was a man of law, someone who preached by the book and knew precisely where his limits lay. Walid, for his part, was no novice. This was not his first interview, not his first silence. He let the pause stretch, allowed it to gain weight, felt the tension settle on the line. And then—he felt it—the crack.

What Harrer finally said confirmed what Walid had already suspected: Rieger was no amateur. He knew where to press, how to reach a soul. Harrer himself had been young when he took the case. Curious. Too curious, perhaps.

He had lived through the Event as a child. He remembered fragments.

Once he began to speak, he spoke for a long time—too long—like a man relieved to finally be heard. His restraints loosened, then faltered. He tried to regain them, excused himself

when the story drifted away from Rieger and circled back to his own memories, his own fear.
That conversation opened a black box. Harrer told Walid what he himself had never dared ask his father.
The Word, he said, had been transmitted to all of humanity at once—without filter, without preparation—until minds fractured under the weight of it. Then came the silence. And after the silence, the first revelation.
The sender was human.
Not metaphorically. Not symbolically. Human—somewhere else in the galaxy. Humanity's technological evolution, Harrer said, had finally reached the first threshold of their technology. Artificial intelligence—our AI—had been enough. Enough to be used as a bridge, enough to be hijacked. Enough to allow communication from the other side, to dictate structures, patterns, instructions into machines—like someone printing a document from the far end of the universe.
Then came the choice of a representative.

Humanity, Harrer said, had misunderstood everything. They tried to appoint a politician, a religious leader, a scientist—forgetting that the Caller already had access to all human knowledge through our own systems. There was nothing left to impress Him with.

So He chose differently.

An unknown. Almost a child. Someone intelligent enough, open enough, unprotected enough to act as a mirror—reflecting the exchange directly into every human mind.

The attempts to interfere followed quickly. Bribery. Censorship. Manipulation—of the messenger, of the satellites transmitting the signal, of the narrative itself.

That was when the Caller grew angry. He uploaded everything.

All the knowledge of His civilization—of the civilization that preceded us. The civilization from which the first humans had fled, escaping judgment, coming to Earth to mold it to their needs and rewrite their origin story. To forget what Harrer called, quietly, the original sin.

Harrer’s voice tightened. He apologized.
Was he crying?
The call ended abruptly.
He asked Walid not to involve him again.
Walid sat motionless in his office, the receiver still warm in his hand, until a nurse knocked and told him the next patient had arrived. They were waiting for his evaluation.
He stood up.
The expertise was still blank.

Chapter 10 – Deadline

The letter from the court of Freising was concise, formal, and final.
Walid was required to submit his expert opinion no later than **6 January 2056**. The document had to be transmitted through secure channels, countersigned by his superior, who would read it in full. No extensions. No informal clarifications. The phrasing was polite, but the implication was unmistakable: the system was tired of waiting.
He opened a new document that evening. The diagnosis was already half-written in his head. The codes existed. The formulations were familiar. He began to type—and stopped almost immediately. What appeared on the screen felt hollow. Impersonal. Empty of meaning. Words arranged correctly, but saying nothing that mattered.
He deleted the paragraph.
He tried again. And again.
Hours passed in repetition: writing, erasing, reformulating. He avoided certain terms instinctively, circling around them without naming them. The Event was never mentioned—not

directly. He feared that even an allusion would tilt the balance, invite scrutiny, force questions he could neither answer nor survive.

For the first time since finishing medical school, he felt the fear of a beginner: the terror of being exposed as incompetent. Not because he lacked knowledge, but because he possessed too much of the wrong kind.

He took the work home.

The apartment was quiet. Antonia was still at work. Walid sat in front of his computer for hours, the cursor blinking like an accusation. Instead of writing, he began to read.

He searched for **2025**.

The results came quickly—too quickly. Articles, analyses, retrospective studies. Every source carried a different interpretation. Alien hypothesis. Cold War psychological warfare. Secret programs. Cultic mass delusion. Wikipedia remained deliberately vague, describing the phenomenon as an "unidentified global cognitive event," stripped of detail, stripped of teeth.

He reached the edges of what could be accessed.
Beyond that lay silence—or worse, warnings. Content removed. Pages archived. He knew better than to push further. He had no intention of being summoned by one of the remaining inquiry committees, those quiet institutions still operating under the mandate of preventing the rise of criminal or sectarian movements. Their reach was discreet, but absolute.
He was a doctor.
A figure of science.
Of authority.
He was also a foreigner.
Suspicion did not need proof. Only deviation. Only interest. Only the wrong questions asked too often.
Walid closed the browser and returned to the document.
He began to write what was expected.
F20.0 Paranoid Schizophrenia.
Differential diagnosis: PTSD with psychotic features.
Reasonable. Defensible. Safe.
The language returned to him then—technical, measured, reassuring in its

neutrality. He described impaired reality testing, fixed delusional beliefs, lack of insight. He cited incidents. Behavioral instability. Risk to self and others. He avoided adjectives that implied coherence.

By midnight, the structure was complete. Still, he did not send it.

He knew that once submitted, the document would become truth—not because it was accurate, but because it was official. Rieger would cease to be a man and become a file number, a closed case, an insurance problem resolved.

Walid saved the document and shut the laptop.

In the silence of the apartment, he felt it again—not a sound, not a word, but a twitch beneath thought itself. A pressure, rhythmic and patient, like something waiting to be acknowledged.

Antonia came home late. She ate alone. She barely spoke to him. She tried, briefly, to pull him out of his work, but his coldness pushed her away. She went to bed before he did.

Walid showered and lay down beside her. When he did, she turned toward him

and placed her hand on his chest. The contact relieved him for a moment—but it did not allow him to close his eyes.
In the dark, he felt her body twitching in sleep, caught in a dream he could not enter. The movement was rhythmic. Regular. Almost mechanical.
He did not give it a name.
Not yet.

Chapter 11-The Drift

Under the lack of sleep, Walid's body began to betray him in small, precise ways.

The first thing to go was color.

His skin, usually dark and dense with warmth, thinned into a muted grey-brown, as if the blood had learned to circulate more cautiously. The tan that once held the light now rejected it. Under fluorescent lamps he looked washed, not sickly, but unfinished—like something still developing that had been exposed too early.

His eyes changed next.

They had always been slow, heavy, half-lidded, absorbing the world with delay. Now they sharpened. Not symmetrically, not cleanly—but unmistakably. A brightness appeared where there had been depth. A shine that did not belong to rest. People began to notice his gaze lingering too long, fixing itself on faces, on sentences, on silences that were not meant to be held.

It was not alertness.

It was hunger.

The irregularity between his eyes remained, but the lag was gone. The

slower eye caught up, almost aggressively, as if compensating for lost time. Together they looked *awake in the wrong way*. Too present. Too involved. Like someone leaning too close to a fire.
Coffee did the rest.
It stripped weight from his movements. The bear began to float.
His steps grew lighter, quicker, less grounded. He gestured more when he spoke. His hands, once content to rest, now punctuated his words. He laughed more often—at moments that did not ask for laughter. He filled pauses instead of respecting them. Speech, once rationed, became available in surplus.
This surprised people.
It surprised him too.
To cover it, he exaggerated it. Played the role harder than necessary. Spoke with enthusiasm that bordered on insistence. Offered explanations before questions were asked. He smiled—too often, too long—as if the smile itself were a credential.
Fragility leaked through the performance.

His beard grew unchecked. Not wild, but neglected. Patches thickened while others thinned, creating a map of inattention. His clothes followed the same logic. Shirts wrinkled. Trousers repeated themselves. Shoes went unpolished. Not from despair—worse—from distraction. The mirror had lost authority.

Antonia noticed.

At first unconsciously. Her eyes slid past him more often. Her questions became shorter. She stopped adjusting his collar. Stopped commenting on his appearance altogether. When he spoke at length, she waited for him to finish instead of interrupting. When he fell silent, she did not fill the gap.

He felt her absence like a draft in a familiar room.

At night, his body no longer settled into sleep; it hovered above it. Muscles tense without purpose. Breath shallow. Thought accelerated but circular. He lay still, eyes open, watching the ceiling perform nothing. When he closed his eyes, images pressed forward uninvited—phrases, diagrams, fragments

of memory that did not belong to him and yet insisted on being housed.
In the morning, he mistook exhaustion for clarity.
In the hospital, colleagues began to say he seemed *different*. More engaged. More present. More… alive. The word pleased him and frightened him in equal measure.
What none of them said aloud was that his solidity was thinning.
That the weight which once anchored him was lifting.
That something inside him had learned a new rhythm—faster, brighter, less patient—and was teaching the rest of his body to follow.
He did not name it.
He only drank another coffee.
It happened on the geriatric ward, late in the afternoon, when the light from the courtyard came in low and flat and made everyone look older than they were.
Walid was standing near the medication room, finishing a note, when she approached him.
The daughter of a patient in room 214.
He had seen her several times before.

Always present. Always polite. The kind of relative who arrived early, stayed long, asked careful questions. Mid-thirties, maybe forty. Well dressed, too well for a hospital, as if she were bracing herself against decay with fabric and perfume.

She stopped closer than necessary.

"You're the doctor who took care of my father yesterday," she said. It was not a question.

Walid nodded. "Yes."

"You're very tall," she added, looking up at him. "I didn't notice before."

He blinked.

People said that often. He usually let it pass like noise.

This time, he didn't move.

"Mmh," he answered.

She smiled, encouraged. "You have a calming presence. He was less agitated after you spoke to him. He even ate."

Walid felt a familiar tightening. Compliments in hospitals were never clean. They carried expectation like bacteria.

"I didn't do much," he said. "Delirium fluctuates."

She laughed softly. “You doctors always say that.”
She stepped a little closer. Not touching. Just inside the margin.
“You must be exhausted,” she went on. “These wards… I don’t know how you do it. Watching people disappear slowly.”
Walid should have redirected the conversation.
He should have named a task, an interruption, a responsibility. That was the ritual. He knew it well.
Instead, he hesitated.
“I manage,” he said.
She looked at his face more carefully now. At the dark circles under his eyes, at the uneven beard he hadn’t trimmed in weeks, at the slight delay in one eye when he focused.
“You don’t sleep much,” she said. Not accusing. Observing.
He felt suddenly exposed. Not seduced. Just noticed.
“That’s not relevant,” he said, too late, too softly.

She tilted her head. “You’re different from the others. Kinder. You listen. My father trusts you.”
That word landed wrong. Trust.
“I’m not his primary physician,” Walid said. “And I can’t—”
“I know,” she interrupted gently. “I’m not asking for anything. Just… it’s rare to meet someone like you here.”
She reached into her bag as she spoke, already moving toward the next step, as if the decision had been made earlier.
“If you ever want a coffee,” she said, pulling out her phone, “or just to talk. Outside of this place.”
She held the phone up, screen open.
The corridor hummed behind them. A call bell rang somewhere. A nurse passed without looking.
Walid felt the moment stretch.
He was aware of the rules. He could recite them. Professional boundaries. Dual relationships. Power imbalance. Vulnerability of relatives.
He also felt tired. Hollowed out. Distracted. As if the part of him that usually intervened had stepped aside.
“It’s not appropriate,” he said.

But he did not step away.
She waited.
Silence did the rest.
He took out his phone.
She typed her number quickly, efficiently, like someone used to administrative forms. Then handed it back to him.
“No pressure,” she said. “Really.”
She smiled, satisfied, and turned away, already walking toward her father’s room.
Walid stood still.
He felt a dull embarrassment bloom in his chest. Not sharp enough to stop him. Not loud enough to correct anything.
What unsettled him was not that she had crossed a line.
It was that he had recognized the line and still allowed it to blur.
He slipped the phone into his pocket and returned to the chart he had been holding, rereading the same sentence three times without understanding it.
Later, he would tell himself it meant nothing.
That it was a harmless interaction.
That he was tired.

But somewhere beneath the fatigue, something else had shifted—quietly, decisively.
A boundary had not been broken.
It had simply failed to matter.
And Walid did not yet understand what that said about him.
It began with the phone.
Not the ringing—Walid never answered it—but the persistence.
The same number. Again. And again.
Short calls, spaced irregularly, never long enough to leave a message. The kind of calling that assumes familiarity.
Antonia noticed it by accident.
They were sitting on opposite ends of the couch, the television on without sound, eating late. Walid's phone lay face-up on the table between them. It vibrated once. Stopped. Vibrated again ten minutes later.
She didn't say anything at first.
By the fourth time, she looked.
"You're popular lately," she said, lightly.
Walid glanced at the screen, then turned it face down. "Wrong number."

She nodded. Too quickly.
Wrong numbers didn’t insist.
The calls continued over the next days. Sometimes during dinner. Sometimes late, when Walid was already half asleep, body heavy, mind restless. He never answered. He never blocked the number either.
Antonia didn’t ask directly. She waited. That had always been her way. She trusted patterns more than explanations. Walid, for his part, became attentive in a way that came too late to be convincing. He asked about her day, listened with an effort that showed. He offered to cook and burned the food. He touched her arm at odd moments, as if checking that she was still there.
“You’re distracted,” she said one evening, not unkindly.
“I’m tired,” he answered.
He was not lying. Just incomplete.
She watched him more closely now. The way he moved through the apartment like a guest. The way he stared into space while brushing his teeth. The way he woke in the night, heart racing, then

lay still, eyes open, careful not to wake her.
Once, when the phone vibrated again, she picked it up before he could.
The name wasn't saved. Just a number.
She handed it back to him without looking at his face.
"Who is it?" she asked.
Walid hesitated. Too long.
"A relative of a patient," he said finally.
"Nothing."
Antonia waited for more. None came.
"That's… not nothing," she said.
He nodded. "I know."
That was the first time he admitted fragility out loud. Not in words, but in posture. Shoulders slightly rounded. Voice lower.
"I didn't do anything," he added, almost defensively.
"I didn't say you did."
But the mistrust had already found its place. Not as accusation, but as a thin film over everything. Conversations slid instead of landing. Touch lost its certainty.
Walid saw it happening. He was not blind.

He saw how she withdrew without leaving. How she stopped telling him small things. How she watched him now, the way one watches a door that might open.

He tried to correct course.

He came home earlier. Put the phone away. Suggested weekends, dinners, plans. He spoke about the future in abstract terms, as if distance might make it safer.

It felt like treatment applied after the infection had spread.

Too late.

Too little.

Not enough.

One evening, Antonia said, quietly, "You're not here anymore."

Walid opened his mouth to protest and found nothing that wasn't already exhausted.

He understood then—with clinical clarity—that in his current state he was not a danger to others.

He was a target.

Porous. Suggestible. Drifting.

And that frightened him more than any accusation could have.

He reached for her hand. She let him take it, but did not squeeze back.
In the silence between them, his phone vibrated again.
He did not look.
But he felt the rhythm of it, patient and persistent, like something waiting.

Chapter 12-The Arrival:

The medication worked.
That was how it was phrased.
Within weeks, Rieger's voice lost its edge. His movements slowed, then fractured. The tremor came first—fine, almost elegant in the fingers—followed by the stiffness, the mask settling over his face like a second skin.
Extrapyramidal side effects, documented and adjusted for. The dosage was reduced, then increased again when the agitation returned in quieter forms.
He ate less.
Not in protest. Not deliberately. Food simply became irrelevant. Trays returned untouched. Water cups remained full. His body thinned in places that should not thin so quickly. Skin over bone. Collar sharp under fabric.
The nurses noted it.
Walid noted it.
Everyone noted it.
One night, Rieger collapsed in the corridor.
No drama. No witnesses. He was found where he had fallen, cheek against the linoleum, breathing shallow but regular.

Blood pressure low. Glucose borderline. Dehydrated.
He was transferred unconscious to a somatic hospital.
Workup. Fluids. Imaging. No stroke. No bleed. No infection that could be named with confidence. He woke twelve hours later, asked for water, said nothing else. By evening, he was back.
Not to the ward.
To geriatrics.
The decision was administrative. Practical. He no longer met the criteria for high-security psychiatry. He was too weak to abscond. Too slow to be dangerous. His diagnosis remained unchanged; only his placement shifted, as if illness could be rearranged like furniture.
Walid learned about the transfer by chance.
He saw the name on the board during the morning briefing. Same handwriting. Different column.
Geriatrics.
He felt something close to relief. Followed immediately by shame.

The first time he saw Rieger again, it was in the corridor near the smoking room. The old man sat in a wheelchair now, blanket over his knees, hands folded with unnatural care. His head tilted slightly to one side, as if listening to something Walid could not hear.
He looked up.
Smiled.
“So,” Rieger said, voice thin but intact. “They put me with your dead.”
Walid stopped.
“I’m not—”
“Geriatrics,” Rieger continued. “Where time finishes digesting people.”
Walid glanced around. A nurse passed without comment. This was allowed. This was normal.
Rieger was too weak to flee.
But he was awake.
And he was exactly where Walid worked.
From that day on, they saw each other daily.
Not by design. By overlap.
Rieger during medication rounds. During nutritional assessments. During quiet afternoons when the ward slowed into

something almost domestic. He watched Walid with an attention that was neither hostile nor grateful.
Persistent.
“You look worse,” Rieger said one afternoon.
Walid ignored him.
“You’re thinner in the face,” Rieger added. “It suits you. You look like someone who listens now.”
Walid wrote in the chart with exaggerated focus.
Rieger leaned forward slightly in the wheelchair. It cost him effort.
“Don’t worry,” he said. “I won’t run. I can barely stand. But they didn’t take my mouth. Or my memory.”
Walid felt the old tightening in his chest.
“This isn’t appropriate,” he said.
Rieger nodded. “No. But it is inevitable.”
The nurses began to notice the pattern. They joked about it lightly. The old man who liked the young doctor. The intellectual. The storyteller. Nothing dangerous.
Walid stopped correcting them.

He told himself it was temporary. That Rieger would be transferred again. That geriatrics was only a holding place.
But Rieger settled.
And Walid began to understand the cruelty of it.
Rieger no longer needed to escape.
He had already arrived.

Chapter 13- The Last Conversation

Walid had learned something about doors in the last few years. Not the philosophical kind, not the kind you read about in myths where a hero goes through one and becomes somebody else.

Real doors.

Institutional doors.

Doors that were supposed to keep things out.

They didn't. Not really. They just made you feel better while the thing you were afraid of found another way in.

He was sitting at his desk, staring at the monitor like it was going to blink first. On the screen was a form. A clean little grid of boxes and headings and drop-down menus, the kind of thing that made people feel like reality could be chopped up into manageable chunks. Diagnosis. Risk Assessment. Compliance. Prognosis.

It was funny, if you liked that kind of humor.

Walid didn't.

He was tired. The kind of tired that lived in the bones and made you forget what you'd come into the room for. He had

been tired since the Event, and the Event had happened long enough ago that tiredness had started to feel like his natural state. Like his default setting.
Outside his office, the clinic hummed softly. Fluorescent lights, distant footsteps, the occasional clink of a cart. A building pretending to be a building and not a machine for holding broken people.
And then—
Knock.
Not loud.
Not urgent.
Just… there.
Walid didn't move. He didn't even blink.
The second knock came after a pause that felt measured. Like whoever was on the other side had a stopwatch in their head.
Walid stood up slowly, because he was not stupid.
He crossed the room and opened the door halfway.
And there he was.
Rieger.
In a wheelchair.

The chair looked like it had been stolen from a hospital basement, which was probably exactly what had happened. The right wheel squeaked when Rieger shifted his weight. His feet were bare on the metal rests, and Walid had the absurd thought that they looked like the feet of a drowned man.

Rieger looked up at him and smiled. "Doctor," he said.

Walid kept his hand on the door. "You shouldn't be here."

"I know," Rieger said, like they were discussing the weather.

Walid glanced down the corridor. Empty. No nurses. No orderlies. No security.

The clinic did that sometimes—look away at the worst possible moment.

Walid opened the door the rest of the way.

Rieger rolled in.

Walid shut the door behind him and the click of the latch sounded too loud in the quiet room. It sounded like a judge bringing down a gavel.

Rieger stopped just inside. He didn't look around. He didn't admire the

diplomas or the framed motivational poster that Walid hated but had never taken down because somebody somewhere might complain.
He just looked at Walid.
And Walid looked back.
Two men in a room. One in a white coat. One in a wheelchair. The setup of a thousand stories.
Only this one didn't have an ending anyone would like.
Rieger's eyes flicked to the desk.
To the monitor.
Walid moved without thinking. His hand slapped the keyboard and the screen went black.
Rieger's smile widened.
"So I can't read what you're writing," he said.
Walid felt his cheeks heat. Anger, shame, something else.
"Why are you here?" Walid asked.
Rieger reached into his pocket.
Walid tensed.
Rieger pulled out a cigarette.
Just one.
He slid it between his lips like a man who'd done it ten thousand times, then

held it there, unlit. Like a kid pretending to be his father.
Walid stared at it.
“No smoking,” he said automatically.
Rieger gave a little laugh. Not loud. Just amused.
“I know,” he said.
He didn’t light it. Didn’t even reach for a lighter. He just kept it in his mouth, like a prop.
Like a ritual.
Walid’s throat tightened.
“You’re not supposed to be unsupervised,” he said.
Rieger shrugged, and in the fluorescent light he looked older than he should’ve. Not old-old. Just… worn. Like the years after the Event had sandblasted him from the inside out.
“Everyone is unsupervised now,” Rieger said. “They just pretend otherwise.”
Walid didn’t know what to say to that.
Rieger took the cigarette out of his mouth and held it between his fingers. His hand trembled. Not much. Enough.
“You want the years after,” he said.
Walid blinked.
“I didn’t say—”

“You didn’t have to,” Rieger said. “You carry it around like a stone in your pocket. It drags you down.”
Walid’s mouth went dry.
He sat back in his chair. He hadn’t meant to, but his legs had decided for him.
Rieger nodded, as if he’d won something.
“The first year was thirst,” he said.
Walid frowned.
“Thirst?” he repeated.
Rieger nodded.
“Hunger is slow,” he said. “Thirst is fast. Thirst is honest.”
He stared at the cigarette like it was a tiny white memory.
“We drank from radiators,” he said. “From puddles. From pipes that coughed rust like old men.”
Walid swallowed.
Rieger’s voice stayed calm, almost conversational, which made it worse.
“My wife,” he said.
Walid’s heart thumped.
“She survived the Event,” Rieger said. “She survived the Word. She survived the silence.”
He paused.

“She died in a stairwell.”
Walid felt the room tilt slightly.
“How?” he asked, even though he didn’t want to know.
“A neighbor,” Rieger said. “A man with a knife. For a bottle of water.”
Walid stared at him.
Rieger looked back.
“That was the first lesson,” Rieger said. “Not that the world ends. That it gets small. Small enough for a person to kill another person over something you used to waste.”
Walid’s hands clenched on the arms of the chair.
Rieger leaned forward a little.
“After that, the states fell,” he said. “Not all at once. One promise at a time.”
Walid could picture it. He’d lived it. He’d watched the news for as long as there had been news, watched the anchors start to sweat and stumble, watched them say we don’t know more and more often until they stopped appearing at all.
“And then the pause,” Rieger said.
“What pause?” Walid asked.
Rieger smiled faintly.

“The information pause,” he said. “After years of overstimulation, people stopped wanting to know.”
Walid frowned.
“That’s not—”
“It is,” Rieger said. “You think people want truth. They don’t. They want relief.”
Walid stared at him.
Rieger’s voice softened.
“The world went medieval,” he said. “Not because we forgot science. Because we lost the ability to share it.”
He lifted the cigarette slightly, as if pointing at an invisible map.
“Water became power,” he said. “Electricity became religion. Radios became scripture. And the men with guns became lawmakers.”
Walid’s chest felt tight.
“And then?” he asked.
Rieger’s eyes sharpened.
“Then came the trenches,” he said. “Order always comes back through violence. It just changes uniforms.”
Walid sat very still.
Rieger looked at him for a long time.

“They’re polishing me,” Rieger said quietly.
Walid blinked.
“What?”
“Medication,” Rieger said. “Protocols. Soft voices. They’re sanding me down until I fit the world again.”
Walid opened his mouth to protest.
Rieger held up a hand.
“I’m not saying it’s evil,” he said. “I’m saying it works.”
He smiled.
“And I don’t want it.”
Walid’s throat tightened.
“What do you want?” he asked.
Rieger leaned forward.
“I want you to stop writing lies,” he said.
Walid’s jaw clenched.
“You’re sick,” he said.
Rieger nodded.
“Yes,” he said. “I am.”
Then his eyes sharpened, bright and clear.
“But I’m not wrong.”
Walid felt something cold crawl up his spine.

Rieger placed the cigarette on Walid's desk with the careful precision of a man placing a bullet on a table.
"Thirty seconds," Rieger said softly.
Walid didn't breathe.
Rieger smiled.
"Ritual," he said.
Then he backed his wheelchair toward the door.
Walid watched him go, unable to move.
At the door, Rieger stopped.
And then—slowly, like it mattered—he stood up.
Walid's muscles tightened, ready to catch him.
Rieger didn't fall.
He left the wheelchair behind like a shell.
He took one barefoot step, then another, and opened the door.
Before he left, he looked back at Walid.
"You're going to hear it again," he said.
Walid whispered, "Hear what?"
Rieger smiled, and the smile wasn't human anymore.
"The Word," he said. "It never left."
Then he was gone.

And the hallway swallowed him like a throat.
Walid sat there for a long time.
The monitor stayed black.
The cigarette sat on the desk.
And in the silence, Walid could almost feel something counting.

Chapter 14- The Report

Walid didn’t touch the cigarette for a full hour.
Maybe longer.
Time was weird now. Time had been weird since the Event. Before, you could measure it in meetings and meals and train schedules. Now it came in waves. Long stretches of nothing, then moments so heavy they bent the day around them.
He stared at the cigarette like it was going to move.
It didn’t.
It just lay there, innocent and accusing.
At some point his hand drifted toward the keyboard.
He hesitated.
Then he turned the monitor back on.
The screen lit up with that dull institutional glow, and Walid felt a ridiculous urge to apologize to it. Like he’d offended a god.
The form was still there.
The cursor blinked.
Patient.
Unforgiving.
He started to type.
Subject exhibits delusional fixation…
He stopped.

His fingers hovered above the keys, and suddenly the words looked wrong. Not medically wrong. Morally wrong.
He tried again.
Patient demonstrates paranoid ideation…
His throat tightened.
He deleted it.
The clinic hummed. Somewhere a door closed. Somewhere someone laughed too loudly, the way people laughed when they didn't want to cry.
Walid leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes.
He saw Rieger's bare feet on the linoleum.
He saw the wheelchair sitting empty in his office like a discarded skin.
He saw the cigarette on his desk.
He heard Rieger's voice:
Thirty seconds.
Walid opened his eyes.
His phone buzzed once at his belt. Not a call. Not an alarm.
Just a vibration.
He froze.
It buzzed again.
Walid's hand went to it slowly, like it might bite.

The screen was blank.
No notification.
No message.
Nothing.
He stared at it, confused, and then—
A thought appeared in his mind with the quiet certainty of a knock at a door.
Not a voice.
Not a sound.
A word.
A single word, placed there like a stone in a shoe.
Found.
Walid's breath caught.
He stood up so fast his chair rolled backward.
"No," he whispered.
The clinic hummed.
The lights stayed on.
Nothing exploded. No windows shattered. No sirens.
Which was somehow worse.
Walid gripped the edge of the desk until his knuckles went white.
He looked at the cigarette.
He looked at the form on the screen.
He looked at his own hands, trembling now.

And he understood something he hadn’t wanted to understand since the very first patient said it, back when the Event was still fresh and people still thought the world would bounce back the way it always had.
This wasn’t a disease.
This wasn’t a delusion.
This wasn’t something you could file away.
It was a rhythm.
It was a ritual.
It was a new law of nature, as simple and brutal as gravity.
Walid sat down slowly.
He put his fingers on the keyboard again.
He began to type, not the diagnosis, not the lie, but the truth—his own truth, the only one he could still hold.
Patient reports…
He stopped.
He deleted it.
He stared at the blinking cursor.
The cursor blinked.
Walid counted without meaning to.
One.
Two.
Three.

His skin prickled.
He felt the pressure behind his eyes.
And then the word returned, not loud,
not dramatic, but absolute.
Found.
Walid whispered, “Rieger…”
Outside his office, the clinic went on
pretending.
Paperwork. Protocols. Soft voices.
The world had rebuilt itself out of fear
and habit and necessity.
The new order was here.
And under it, something older waited
patiently, counting down in thirty-second
intervals, like a clock no one had built
but everyone had to obey.
Walid reached out and picked up the
cigarette.
He turned it in his fingers.
He didn’t light it.
He didn’t even want to.
But he understood the ritual now.
He put it down carefully.
Like a relic.
Like a warning.
Like proof.
He looked at the report one last time.
Then he closed the file without saving.

He shut the monitor down.
He stood up.
And in the dark, with the hum of the building around him, Walid listened.
Waiting for the next knock.
Waiting for the next word.
Waiting for the thing that had never left.

Chapter 15- J+1

The Event did not end the world.
It ended coordination.
Skies of the world showed us naked
from the light pollution our universe
collapsing with the satellite burning
down entering the atmosphere.
And when coordination dies, geography
changes first.
Not the mountains. Not the rivers. Not
the coastlines.
The *meaning* of them.
Borders became ink. Flags became
fabric. Treaties became museum pieces.
The old lines on the map were still there,
printed in fading colors, but nobody bled
for them anymore because nobody could
afford to. There was no capital to call, no
ministry to answer, no international
court to pretend it could punish the
hungry.
The Event shaped a new map, drawn
with different instruments:
a well.
a transformer station.
a warehouse.
a bridge.
a hospital with a working sterilizer.
a radio tower still standing like a broken

tooth.
a road that could be traveled without being eaten alive by men.
The first governments to return were not governments.
They were logistics.
The first ministers were not elected.
They were armed.
Armed forces took the lead not because they were evil, not because they were noble, but because they were the only remaining organism trained to move as one body. They had radios. They had ranks. They had the habit of obeying.
And obedience, after the Event, became a resource like water.
International law disappeared the way a voice disappears in a storm: not suddenly, but uselessly.
There were still words. There were still signatures. There were still announcements made into dead microphones.
But law without enforcement is a prayer, and prayer does not stop hunger.
The return to order did not arrive like peace.
It arrived like trenches.

At first it was roaming violence. Men with rifles and no future. Families traveling at night. Streets turned into borders. Doors turned into fortresses. Water became currency before bullets did. The world shrank to what your hands could carry.
Then it became organized.
Checkpoints. Passes. Curfews. Ration cards printed on stolen paper. Patrol schedules written in pencil. Markets that were “authorized,” which meant controlled, which meant taxed, which meant protected, which meant owned.
The chaos learned grammar.
And then the grammar hardened into a front.
Trench war.
Not because anyone wanted the past, but because the past was the only form of war that could be sustained with what remained.
A trench is a promise carved into dirt:
Here is where we stop dying in motion.
Here is where we die in place.
The new states were not born in parliaments.
They were born in mud.

A kilometer of earth mattered more than a speech. A hill mattered more than a constitution. A bridge mattered more than a flag. Men became architects of violence again, engineers of stagnation. They dug, they fortified, they mapped the world by angles of fire.

The sky watched.

And behind the front, something else returned—slowly, reluctantly—like an animal that had fled the house and only came back when it was sure the fire was out.

Electricity.

Not the electricity of before, invisible and arrogant, taken for granted like air. This electricity was fragile. Local. Personal.

A generator that ran for two hours. A solar panel bolted to a roof like a miracle. A single bulb turning on in a room and making people cry because it proved the night could be pushed back, even if only by a meter.

Water.

Not water in pipes that nobody thought about.

Water as a route. Water as a convoy. Water as a daily negotiation with men who held keys.
Radio.
Not entertainment.
Command.
Radio became the new scripture. A voice crackling through static was not information, it was existence. To be heard was to still be inside the world.
Delivery returned.
Not commerce. Not comfort.
Survival.
A truck arriving with sacks of grain was a military event. A delivery schedule was a constitution. A road cleared of mines was a treaty. The first peace was not signed—it was driven.
Old maps resurfaced like bones.
People dug them out of schools, of libraries, of offices with collapsed ceilings. They spread them on tables and argued over them as if the paper itself could bring back the old world. They traced roads with trembling fingers, naming places that no longer existed, places that had become ash, places that

had become camps, places that had become kingdoms.
And old books…
Old books became sacred not because they were beautiful, but because they were instructions.
Manuals were worth more than novels.
A page on electrical circuits was worth more than gold.
A chemistry textbook was worth more than a gun—because the gun could kill once, but the book could feed a factory for years.
Science returned the way language returns after trauma:
broken.
stuttering.
relearned.
People did not "resume" progress.
They reassembled it from scraps, from memory, from diagrams that survived in damp basements. They learned again what had once been effortless. They relearned sterilization. They relearned refrigeration. They relearned the mathematics of bridges. They relearned that clean water was not a luxury, it was the first law of civilization.

Computers came back like ghosts.
Not sleek. Not small. Not everywhere.
They came back as rooms.
As machines built from scavenged parts and prayed over like idols. Old engineers became priests. Young minds became apprentices. The first code was written like a spell, typed slowly, reverently, as if the wrong symbol would invite the Event back into the circuit.
And maybe it did.
Because every time a screen lit up again, every time a network connected again, every time storage returned, the world felt that old pressure behind the eyes.
That memory of memory.
That terror of too much knowing.
People did not trust information anymore.
They feared it.
They had been overdosed for years—alarms, rumors, breaking news, endless emergency—until the nervous system itself had snapped. After the Event, there was an information pause. Not because there was nothing to say, but because the mind refused to hear.
Silence became a policy.

Silence became a medicine.
Silence became law.
And in the new order, the greatest crime was not theft.
Not murder.
Not rebellion.
It was *unsanctioned truth.*
Because truth, in the world after, was not light.
It was heat.
It burned.
It spread.
It destabilized.
So they built a world that could function with less of it.
A world of rationed electricity.
Rationed water.
Rationed speech.
Rationed memory.
A world where the old maps were studied like forbidden scripture and the old books were read aloud in locked rooms, guarded by men with rifles, as if knowledge itself might escape and infect the air.
They called it recovery.
They called it reconstruction.
They called it the return to order.

But the order did not return the way it had been.
It returned with scars.
It returned with trenches.
It returned with rituals.
And underneath all of it, beneath the new borders drawn by supply lines and fear, beneath the slow resurrection of machines and networks, beneath the discipline and the paperwork and the carefully controlled light and every line of code—hides a fear of giving the key of our door to a stranger.

Chapter 16-Exodus

Walid didn't know why he hadn't mentioned it.
That Rieger had finally regained his ability to stand. To walk.
That the danger of him fleeing had never truly disappeared.
It was simple, really. Rieger wasn't weak because of medication or old age. He was weak because Walid had allowed him to be.
It wasn't that Walid hadn't noticed the signs. Rieger's strength had returned subtly, a little more each day. But when he stood in front of Walid—eyes sharp, skin stretched over tired bone—Walid had seen something else:
A quiet request for oblivion.
The unspoken truth was that Walid didn't want Rieger to escape. Not really. There was a part of him—small but unmistakable—that wanted Rieger to stay, to remain at the edge of his life. To stop haunting him with unfinished conversations, with impossible questions. Walid didn't want to face the idea of Rieger disappearing, of the last link to his own unraveling story breaking.

But that didn’t mean he could say it out loud.
Did he assume that his colleagues already knew?
Or did he simply want to believe that nothing was wrong, that Rieger was no longer a threat because the threat had moved somewhere else?
Maybe Walid had even hoped Rieger would stop tormenting him. Stop asking too much. Stop forcing him to confront what he had allowed to happen.
When he finally went home that evening, Antonia was waiting for him. She was already eating. She had cooked, but she hadn’t waited.
When he entered, she didn’t stand up. She sat with her back to the entrance, answering his greeting without special emotion, her eyes fixed on her plate.
Walid sat down on the couch on the other side of the living room—the open kitchen between them—and leaned his head back.
Only then did Antonia turn around.
Her words drove the last nail into the coffin.

“In the name of everything you hold sacred,” she said, “why are you doing this to me?”
Walid didn’t understand at first. He only looked at her, perplexed. Then Antonia continued, as if anticipating his silence.
“Yes. This. Not being here. Not thinking about me. Forgetting to call, to check on me. You come home at night and leave before I wake up, like you’re escaping me. You make me think you want to leave.”
She paused, then added, colder:
“Your parents contacted me. You know they never do. We don’t even speak the same language. All I understood was that they *forgave* you—yes, forgave you—for being with me. Why? Tell me why. If you think I’m a mistake, if you believe we’re not compatible, why are we still together?”
Antonia wasn’t the kind of person who cried when she said such things. She spoke calmly, clearly, as if she had rehearsed every sentence. In a chess game, she would have been the queen—strategic, relentless, intelligent.

Walid didn't move. He didn't stand up, didn't cross the room, didn't sit facing her. He only whispered:
"I let him go."
"What?"
"I let him escape," Walid said louder.
Antonia understood immediately—and completely misunderstood.
"So I'm talking about us. About our relationship. About our future. About *you*. And all you can tell me is that your crazy patient dug a tunnel under the clinic? Now that he's free, invite him here so you can spend more time with him."
It wasn't a storm.
It was a hurricane.
A guillotine looking for heads.

The next day, in the Admissions's office with his senior doctor, Walid couldn't bring himself to care.
His senior was talking again.
As always.
Stipulating rules.
Correcting this.
Listing procedures.
Pointing out the obvious.

It was the same ritual every morning after the “Big Escape” incident. The one that hadn’t really been an escape—just Rieger’s silent protest against the world he had been locked into. And Walid, of course, had been the one to sign off on the transfer.

Not that he would ever admit it.

The senior doctor’s voice droned on. Walid stopped listening after the first few sentences. His body was present, but his mind had already drifted away. He could predict the rest: protocol, medication compliance, professional responsibility.

It was all irrelevant.

The interns and nurses called the senior “OCD,” joking about his obsessive tendencies when he wasn’t around. Some admired his attention to detail. Others mocked his inability to see the bigger picture.

Walid didn’t care.

Not about the obsession with order.

Not about the clinic’s rules.

Not about the passive-aggressive humor of his colleagues.

His life had been on pause for two months.
And now, more than ever, he couldn't find the play button.
At home, Antonia had started talking about "separate times."
A pause.
A break.
She didn't push him. She never did. But the damage was already there—the slow fracture beneath their lives, the growing distance that widened with every day of silence.
Back home, his parents had stopped calling. They had grown used to his absence. He had cut the ties so quickly and so completely that returning now felt like an act of humiliation.
He couldn't show up pretending nothing had happened.
He couldn't explain.
And worse—he didn't know why he wasn't calling.
He found another place to hide.
The Selbsterfahrungsgruppe.
A mandatory part of his psychiatric training: therapists meeting to process their own emotions before treating

others. Walid had hoped it might help him find words. Instead, he felt like a foreigner in a room full of fluent speakers of a language he didn't know. Their words were clean. Structured. Precise.

His were not.

The supervisor—an older man who enjoyed pushing boundaries—kept pressing him to speak. To share.

It wasn't that Walid didn't want to. The words simply didn't come. Inside him was something dense and unformed, a mass of confusion he couldn't shape into sentences. They wanted vulnerability; Walid could only offer dissociation.

"Why do you think you're here?" the supervisor asked once, frustrated.

Walid didn't know.

He left the group early that evening. The others stayed behind, discussing insights, breakthroughs, emotional progress. Walid stood at the door, feeling the weight return to his shoulders. His steps felt too heavy, his breathing labored.

Outside, the night air cut sharply against his skin.
He didn't know what he was running from. But everything he had ignored—the unspoken fears, the walls closing in, the growing distance from the person he used to be—followed him home.
The automatic door closed behind him. Walid stepped into the cold Munich night of January, pulled his coat tight, wrapped his scarf higher around his neck, and dragged a wool cap down over his head. The air bit immediately. He crossed the parking lot and slid into the clinic car. The engine started without resistance. He pressed the pedal, and the car moved off almost silently.
He didn't want to go home.
But he was too tired to drive aimlessly, too drained to look for company, too hollow even to pretend he needed distraction. So he drove home anyway, choosing the longest route—the one that looped wide through the outskirts.
He passed a dozen small villages, each unevenly lit by rows of houses clinging to one side of the road. Yellow windows.

Drawn curtains. Kitchens still awake. Lives continuing, sealed and warm. The other side of the road was dark—fields frozen and unreadable.

Without realizing it at first, Walid began studying the road signs more carefully than necessary. Each curve. Each reflective arrow. Each bus stop shelter. He was looking for him.

A figure wrapped in a blanket. Bare feet on asphalt. A ghost with hollow eyes and a mouth full of words. Rieger, free at last from corridors and charts, roaming the night instead of Walid's mind.

He imagined stopping the car.

Would he let him in? Drive him wherever he wanted to go? Or would he reach for his phone, call the police, and return him to the hospital like a misplaced object?

He didn't know.

What he did know—what tightened his chest without becoming a thought—was that he was searching for someone to talk to. Not someone who would understand.

Someone who would judge him anyway. Someone who would mock his doubts,

strip them bare, and call them what they were.
The road remained empty.
The villages fell behind him, one by one, swallowed by the dark.

Chapter 17 – Choose Your Ending

Walid could have stopped.
That was the version he preferred to remember himself by: reasonable, cautious, intact enough to preserve a life. He allowed himself mechanisms of defense—professional distance, routine, silence. He let Rieger dissolve into paperwork, into absence, into something no longer his responsibility. And in doing so, he moved on. Not forward. Just onward. Working. Existing. Surviving.
That ending was possible.
But it depended on one condition: that he did not look too closely.
There was another path.
A stubborn one.
In it, Walid refused to accept that Rieger had simply vanished into the margins of the city. He followed fragments—half-remembered names, references buried in reports, forums that disappeared as soon as they were found. Slowly, a pattern emerged. Rieger was not alone. He had never been.
There were others who believed.
Not in madness, not in chaos—but in continuity. A dispersed network, quiet,

disciplined, convinced that what had happened was not an accident but a prophecy interrupted. They spoke of the Caller not as a phenomenon, but as an origin. A God, perhaps—not in the religious sense, but as an intelligence beyond refusal. What humanity had experienced was not collapse, they said, but premature exposure.

They were trying to rebuild the technology.

Not openly. Not recklessly. Piece by piece. Old hardware. Analog workarounds. Human relays where machines had failed. Their goal was simple and impossible: to be contacted again.

What Walid heard dismantled him.

Not because it was convincing—but because it was coherent. Too coherent. It cut across his internal architecture, severing distinctions he had relied on all his life: pathology and belief, science and revelation, trauma and truth.

His reality thinned.

He drank more. Slept less. Talked too much, then not at all. His work suffered. It was noticed. A senior suggested rest.

Then insisted on it. A long sick leave followed—administrative, benevolent, irrevocable.
During this time, his citizenship application progressed.
That, too, required scrutiny.
A routine security check uncovered names, contacts, digital traces. The organization he had communicated with appeared on a list—long, dense, meticulously categorized. Political. Religious. Hybrid. Classified as potentially dangerous.
He was asked to sign a declaration. That he did not belong. That he had never belonged. That he would never belong.
He hesitated.
That was enough.
Interviews followed. Then interrogations. His words lost weight. His explanations lost coherence. His profession, once a shield, became a liability. A psychiatrist fascinated by dangerous ideas was no longer a doctor. He was a risk.
Credibility dissolved. Residency status followed. Then came the word

expulsion—not spoken loudly, but present in every sentence.
The process took time. It always does.
It ended quietly.
Walid found himself in a room with white walls, a metal table, a blanket folded too neatly on a chair. A cup of coffee sat untouched in front of him—black, cold, undrinkable. He was waiting to be questioned again.
No one explained how long he would stay. No one needed to.
For the first time, the symmetry became undeniable.
The blanket. The waiting. The administrative silence.
This was not punishment. This was classification.
And somewhere, deep beneath exhaustion and fear, a familiar pressure stirred—rhythmic, patient, unnamed.
He did not resist it.

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